

# Is Beijing Adopting an Ethnonationalist Foreign Policy?

## Warning Signs Emerge

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Around the world, governments from Poland to Myanmar are stoking ethnonationalist sentiment to consolidate support around otherwise divisive political agendas. For smaller or more homogenous countries, this has typically taken the form of inward-looking domestic policy shifts, such as the immigration restrictions and economic protectionism resurgent in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. But for larger or more economically powerful states, ethnonationalist sentiment tends to facilitate a belligerent foreign policy as well. History is replete with the ominous consequences of ethnonationalism spilling out from large countries onto the world stage—and there are signs that the world's most populous country, China, could become the latest example.

For larger powers, a sizable or high-status ethnic diaspora can be a tempting target to co-opt in the name of an ethnonationalist foreign policy. States that bind their legitimacy to ethnic identity often make special efforts to reaffirm that identity among co-ethnics abroad, expanding the state's power and reach beyond geographic borders in doing so. Perhaps consequently, these states have sometimes pursued interventionist foreign policies to “protect” their people abroad.

Inter-war Germany provides the most potent example of this interventionist, ethnonationalist policy. Adolf Hitler actively promoted ethnic German identity beyond the Third Reich's borders and used the status of ethnic Germans as a pretext to invade neighboring states. More recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin cited protection of ethnic Russians from an anti-Russian government in Kiev as a pretext for his 2014 invasion of Crimea, claiming upon annexation that he “could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress.” Although these two cases have their own specific externalities, the critical implication is that ethnonationalist powers are more expansionist because they either earnestly want to protect their ethnicity or they want to use it as a convenient cover for interventionist policy—or a combination of both.

## ENGAGING THE DIASPORA

Beijing is now displaying the warning signs of an emerging ethnonationalist power; it is actively trying to co-opt a massive and far-flung diaspora to advance its foreign policy goals.

Because of both the historic movement of people and the more recent economic resettlements that have accompanied investments along China's Belt and Road Initiative, the population of ethnic Chinese living outside of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan now numbers upward of 50 million, larger than the population of Australia, Canada, or Kenya. Moreover, Chinese diaspora communities are concentrated in strategically important countries and key emerging economies, including 32 million residing in Southeast Asia, one million in Australia, 400,000 in Pakistan, over 300,000 in South Africa, and even 250,000 in Brazil. The vast majority of overseas Chinese do not hold Chinese citizenship, but the Communist Party in Beijing is nevertheless building policies to engage them and reinforce a common ethnic identity in order to align the diaspora's interests with its own.

**First, Beijing has attempted to forge closer links between the Chinese diaspora and China's own economy.** Beijing has channeled its foreign investment traffic through this population, occasionally to a surprisingly high degree. This connection is most notable in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, where Chinese-Indonesians make up two-to-three percent of the population, but are party to 90 percent of all commerce between the two countries. This model of engagement, which both enriches the mainland investor and the ethnically Chinese in-country facilitator, is proliferating as Beijing adopts policies explicitly aimed at raising the influence and profiles of the Chinese diaspora in their home countries. As Beijing continues its economic reforms, it is clearly indicating to the Chinese diaspora that they, too, have a place in President Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream."

**Second, Beijing is strengthening cultural ties with Chinese populations abroad through an official diaspora management body called the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which operates under the State Council.** This agency has wooed China's overseas population with government-sponsored trips to Chinese youth camps that seek to imprint Beijing's state-directed version of Chinese ethnic identity and heritage. The office is also beginning to loosen restrictions on ethnic Chinese immigrants acquiring permanent resident cards in China. There is, moreover, a deliberate campaign from the highest levels of government to recall overseas Chinese scientists and academics, appealing to their sense of patriotism (as well as offering hefty repatriation bonuses). This global re-acculturation campaign seeks to solidify the Chinese identity—on Beijing's terms.

**Lastly, and most controversially, Beijing appears to be interested in the political mobilization of the Chinese diaspora.** New Zealand intelligence bodies have recently investigated Yang Jian—a sitting member of the New Zealand Parliament with markedly pro-Beijing stances—for suspicious ties to Chinese military and intelligence institutions as well as for donations to his political party from Chinese companies with dubious motives such as Inner Mongolia Rider Horse Industry Ltd's U.S. \$104,000 gift this spring. There have been a series of similar cases in Australia. And the United Front Work Department, a Chinese government entity under the powerful Central Committee, has been implicated in assembling a network of overseas Chinese contacts. Although there has been no definitive judgement in many of these cases, accusations of political intrigue are likely to increase over time as long as the Communist Party in Beijing works to define the Chinese ethnic identity on its own terms and, by mobilizing communities around that state-driven identity, exploit it for its own interests.

An intense diaspora engagement strategy could provide a rationale for a more assertive Chinese foreign policy. Beijing could justify abandoning its long-held policy of non-intervention if ethnic Chinese beyond its borders were threatened. If the mistreatment of one Chinese–American by United Airlines garnered so much attention within China’s state-run media, it is not difficult to imagine more violence against ethnic Chinese—say, in a Belt and Road country hosting ethnic Chinese infrastructure workers—justifying a more direct response from Beijing. Countries such as Sri Lanka, where Chinese investments have been met with a violent protests, potentially fit the bill. Worse yet, if some members of the Chinese diaspora see themselves as dependent on China’s own rise and fall, Beijing could mobilize them to advocate (or demonstrate for) pro-Beijing policies. This type of mobilization already happens regularly against figures like the Dalai Lama, where Beijing can cause headaches for his hosts without lifting a finger.

Even a more benign interpretation of China’s diaspora engagement suggests that Beijing is likely heading toward trouble. The proliferation of China’s interests abroad—and the often heavy-handed way it pursues them—has been accompanied by growing anti-Chinese sentiment around the world, as evidenced by clashes in Zambia and souring attitudes in Sri Lanka. By playing up international identity politics, Beijing risks further fueling ethnic grievances, which in turn could put its growing overseas investments in jeopardy while subjecting the Chinese diaspora to an ethnic backlash. That is true in Malaysia, where many ethnic Chinese are looking to Beijing to welcome them back, potentially presenting a real immigration dilemma. Others may respond to an anti-Chinese backlash by spurning investment or engagement from Beijing, seeking to more loudly signal loyalty to their home countries. Australia may be an early test case as the government considers sweeping new campaign finance and espionage legislation amidst concerns about Beijing’s growing influence.

## **COUNTERING THE OFFENSIVE**

Although countries may have a difficult time confronting the statist source of these challenges, they do have options to inoculate themselves against an actionable ethnonationalist offensive. Deliberate integration efforts will be critical; a community whose identity is accepted and celebrated locally will be less likely to turn to Beijing for a sense of place than a diaspora that is isolated and scorned. Further, stronger transparency requirements for foreign funding in both business and political influence will not only shine a spotlight on meddling from Beijing, but can also preempt divisive rumors claiming a diaspora’s divided loyalties from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Indeed, an ethnonationalist mobilization strategy holds severe risks for the very community it supposedly seeks to empower. Should Beijing try to exploit its diaspora to power a more assertive, interventionist foreign policy, overseas Chinese would be among the first to suffer. Beijing’s attempts to use ethnic consolidation to justify aggressive action abroad could stoke anti-Chinese prejudice against deeply rooted diaspora communities—and alienate the very people China seeks to enlist. China has a long and storied heritage: its people, traditions, and culture are celebrated throughout the world. After all, it is the Chinese people that have held constant as emperors, dynasties, and governments have come and gone.

If Beijing succeeds at stoking ethnonationalism for its own purposes and turns people into pawns, we will all be worse off for it.